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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: LIFE ON THE STEPPE, FEBRUARY 14 - 20

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¶1. NOTE: This is another in a series of weekly cables drawn mostly from public media, as well as think-tank, NGO, and opposition web-sites, selected to show the diversity of life in Kazakhstan, and information about it available to citizens of Kazakhstan. Our goal is to choose what might interest and be of use to various end-users in Washington and -- especially -- to provide a more complex view from the other side of the world, illustrating the vitality (and sometimes the quirkiness) of discourse available to citizens of Kazakhstan. END NOTE.

LOCAL ASSEMBLY REFUSES RUBBER-STAMP SECRETARY

¶2. In an unprecedented move, in January, a local government assembly ("maslikhat") in the district of Kaztalovka, Western Kazakhstan oblast, dismissed the assembly secretary appointed by the district governor and elected a new one. The assembly explained that they no longer want to be ruled by the district government ("akimat"). A spokesman for the assembly said, "We are allowed to play only one role, to vote quietly and obediently for decisions already made by the akimat. We are not free to make independent decisions even on the budget. But we feel a strong sense of responsibility toward our people, stronger than our fear of the akimat. We want to serve the interests of the people, not the interests of the government. We need a change!"

¶3. According to press reports, the governor was shocked by the assembly's decision. He invited all 12 members of the maslikhat to his office the next morning and announced that their decision was illegal. The assembly members immediately filed a complaint with local prosecutors against the governor for interfering with the affairs of the assembly. Prosecutors warned the governor that his interference was illegal, but they also filed a formal protest of the assembly's decision to remove the appointed secretary. The rebellious assembly members say that they have the full support of the people and will continue to press their case, despite strong pressure from the district governor on them, their relatives, and their employers. The deputy chairman of the regional office of the ruling party, Nur Otan, told journalists that he opposes the election of a new secretary and promised that the party would soon look into the issue.

VALENTINE'S DAY FRIVOLITY

14. A local assembly member in the eastern Kazakhstan city of Pavlodar said he is concerned about "frivolous and erotic" Valentine's Day cards sold to schoolchildren. Askar Bahralinov said the Valentine's Day holiday in Kazakhstan has "gotten out of hand" and has no place in Kazakhstan's primary schools. He complained that many who celebrate it are completely unaware of other, more important holidays, such as the Day of the Armed Forces. Several members of the maslikhat spoke out in support of Bahralinov and suggested that Valentine's Day cards be analyzed by experts to decide whether or not they should be banned. Alas, the maslikhat ultimately realized that it had no funds to support such an analysis.

LOCAL DEPUTY DEMANDS THE FLOOR

15. During a public hearing in Zhambul oblast, assembly member Asaubai Mailybayev demanded a formal apology from chairman Yerkinbek Soltibayev, who promised to give him the floor during the session, then refused to do so. If Soltibayev will not apologize, Mailybayev said he will sue him for violating his right to free speech. Mailybayev said he let the chairman know well in advance of his desire to take the floor, but at the last minute, the agenda was altered and he was denied a chance to speak. "I simply wanted to speak about what is worrying me and my constituents," he told the press. "During these meetings, we always pat ourselves on the back and say what a great job we're doing, but the reality is, we're facing a budget deficit and we're wasting the resources we receive from the federal budget." Mailybayev said, for example, that local farmers planted 4,800 hectares of sugar beets last year, but 75 percent of the crop failed due to a lack of water. "We import potatoes from Kyrgyzstan, fruit from China, and sugar cane from Cuba," he said. "And yet, our oblast leaders say that local farmers won't be affected by the crisis and people will not have to pay higher prices. How can they tell people such outrageous lies?" Mailybayev told journalists that his speech would have sounded "off

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key from the chorus, which is why I'm sure they didn't give me the floor." When he was first denied a chance to speak, he left the podium, walked to an open microphone, and began to speak -- at which point, he said, they simply switched off the mikes and adjourned the hearing.

SUNFLOWER OIL A HOT COMMODITY

16. Not so long ago, thieves targeted electronics stores to steal cell phones, music players, and televisions. But in Karaganda oblast, there has been a noticeable increase in break-ins at grocery stores. This week, for example, police arrested two unemployed men for attempting to steal approximately \$1500 worth of food and \$1000 worth of sunflower oil. "We've doubled our guards at the big markets," said Maxim Novikov, deputy manager of a private security firm in Karaganda. "As soon as they devalued the tenge, prices for food products started to rise -- and so did the number of break-ins," he said.

E-GOVERNMENT IN ACTION

17. Local residents in the city of Stepnogorsk, located approximately 100 kilometers north of the capital Astana, have been complaining to Albert Rau, the governor of Akmolinsk oblast, about a lack of essential social services -- via the governor's web log. "Dear Governor," began one posting, "This is Stepnogorsk calling. The temperature outside is 30 degrees below zero and there is no heat in our apartments. Since 11:00 this morning, we haven't had hot water and since 1:00, we've had no water at all. We can't cook, wash our kids, or drink water! You promised to fix the problem with our electric power station. Isn't there something you can do?" The governor replied the same day on the site, "If the shareholders of the power station do not take urgent measures to address this situation, then it raises the question of whether to return the company to state ownership. Now, about your water. There was in fact a serious accident in your area due to a burst water main. Emergency crews are now on the scene. Please, we ask for your patience and understanding." Two days later, there appeared another

posting: "Stepnogorsk here again. Still no water, hot or cold. Why are my neighbors and myself denied a chance to live a normal life, to take a shower, drink clean water, and not live in fear of what tomorrow will bring?"

HOAGLAND